

ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS-RELEVANCE IN THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The novel helps quite a lot to know about the human relationship in the contemporary society. When the different characters are considered individually what comes to one's mind is that the human relations are attached no significance in the society portrayed in the novel. In short, contemporary religion does not occupy an enviable position in the eyes of the novelist. For the same reason she takes every opportunity to criticize it rather mercilessly.

KEYWORDS: Contemporary Society, Criticism of the Hindu Society, Political Scene, Indo - Anglian Novel, Alienation, Modernism" and "Post-Modernism, Isolation and Nostalgia, Untouchables

INTRODUCTION

In **The God of Small Things** the conflict exists at individual and societal levels. The novel graphically shows that how people are helpless to resolve these levels of friction. The novel helps quite a lot to know about the human relationship in the contemporary society. When the different characters are considered individually what comes to one's mind is that the human relations are attached no significance in the society portrayed in the novel. In short, contemporary religion does not occupy an enviable position in the eyes of the novelist. For the same reason she takes every opportunity to criticize it rather mercilessly.

Though born in Kerala most of her ideas and thoughts are governed by the spirit of being an Indian. India is a land of many languages and many more religions. It is very clear that this book simply as a criticism of the Hindu society. Because it shows that every society is bound by the same laws, the habits of people, and all their prejudices. They did not come with any particular moment, nor can they be attributed to persons.

The political scene had come up for discussion even earlier and among other things what would perhaps be notable in the novel is the indication that vote-bank politics is very active in the contemporary society which Roy tried to portray in the novel.

RELEVANCE IN THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Though she spread her hands on various fields like architecture, film industry, TV Serials and so on her search for identity is fulfilled only in writing. She had not written with any intention of getting any rewards but only to vent out her story which was heard only to her inner ears. It was to her own satisfaction.

In dealing with the interior landscape and the psychic odyssey of the characters, Roy has extended the thematic horizon of the Indo - Anglian Novel. Her novel tends to provide the reader a curiosity to read the entire novel without losing interest till the end of the novel, making the characters to live in the hearts of the readers for a long time. They are

not kaleidoscopic in their thematic projection.

This novel unfurls a plethora of details regarding the changing political scene in Kerala, the problems besetting women in a patriarchal society, cast taboos, the lives of rudderless children of a broken home, vivid description of bees and birds, flowers and trees, sky and silver in a language that speaks directly to the heart. It is the story of a broken woman in a broken atmosphere, narrated as perceived through the tiny eyes of her twins:

The novel can be said to be about several other things. It is a satire on politics — communist establishment, to be more specific. Though it is a protest novel with subversive and taboo-breaking, it tells the story of a family. Those who worried about religion can certainly give a religious sentiment to it. If one wishes, an anti-establishment dimension can also be given to the novel. The book has taken a strong position in it against the way the 'untouchables' are treated in the society.

Set in Kerala in the 1960s, *The God of small Things* is about two children, the two-egg twins Estha and Rahel, and the shocking consequences of a pivotal event in their young lives, the accidental death-by-drowning of a visiting English cousin. In magical and poetic language, the novel paints a vivid picture of life in a small rural Indian town, the thoughts and feelings of the two small children and the complexity and hypocrisy of the adults in their world ([http://website line one.net/ ~ jon.simmons/roy/tghost2htm](http://website.lineone.net/~jon.simmons/roy/tghost2htm).)

A lot of the atmosphere of *A God of Small Things* is based on my experiences of what it was like to grow up in Kerala. Most interestingly, it was the only place in the world where religions coincide, there's Christianity, Hinduism, Marxism and Islam and they all live together and rub each other down. When you see all the competing beliefs against the same background you realise how they all wear each other down. To me, I couldn't think of a better location for a book about human beings. (Ibid)

The lone self, Estha does not undergo the pangs of alienation as does Hemingway's Santiago, who stands isolated from every entity and group, even from God. Though Estha stopped talking it does not seem a hindrance even to others. His silence is understood by the people. When he goes to the market he gets vegetables of his choice without voicing it out literally. Arundhati's women are not totally cut off from familial and social ties but women who remain within these orbits and protest against monotony injustice and humiliation. Ammu, for example is not a mere goddess or a robot but a self-actualising and self-realising individual.

The terms "modernism" and "post-modernism" are becoming increasingly fashionable and the readers of the novel will be curious to know which label fits Roy's novel best. It may not be absurd if one says that much will depend on how one defines these terms. Perhaps post-modernism may be more a way of reading than a way of writing. Virtually any work can be said to have post-modern characteristics if we read it in the right spirit. Barth (1990) has observed that "Joyce Carol Gates writes all over the aesthetical map...My own novels seem to me to have both modernist and post modernist attributes: my short story series, *Lost in the Funhouse*, strikes me as mainly late-modernist, though some critics have praised or damned it as conspicuously post-modernist" (p. 66). Similarly Me Hale (1987) has depicted that modernism reveals epistemological concerns, post-moderns with ontological ones, so there is a "shift of dominant from problems of *knowing* to the problems of *modes of being*" (p. 10).

Unlike R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya, Roy is mainly concerned with the portrayal of inward or psychic reality of the characters. Her emphasis on literature is neither a means of escaping reality nor a vehicle

for parading political, social, religious, and moral ideas, but it is an exploration and an enquiry. She imparts no message preaches no morals. Narayan, Anand and Bhattacharya have subject matter with opulence, and rich experience. As a woman novelist, she has her limits. Yet her novel has intensity, though not variety. The contemporaneity in her novel is not deliberately or elaborately dealt with. She has adopted a realistic mode of writing while dealing with the problem of the alienated self,. Her characters quest for identity is different from that of Savithri in R. K. Narayan's 'The Dark Room' or Madeleine in Raja Rao's 'The Serpent and the Rope'.

Unlike Narayan and Malgonkar, Roy does not believe in a pre- conceived plot or in its linear movement in terms of exposition, *conflict* and resolution. It is just an idea occupying one's subconscious, mind, a fragment of her imagination and a flash of her vision. While writing on social documentation Anand, Narayan and Bhattacharya selected characters from amongst socio-economic preys and predators. But Roy is concerned with the delineation of psychological reality, and hence prefers such characters that are peculiar and eccentric rather than general and common place. Roy's English becomes so flexible and tractable that it not only yields to the steering and churning of her intellect and the movement of her pen but also rises to such poetic heights so as to mirror and manifest her visions and views. It is conveyed through her stream of consciousness technique, her use of flashbacks and lyrical language. While dealing with the psyche of the characters, their motivations and compulsions, move along the labyrinthine and dimly-lit corridors of inner reality.

Alienation is basically a western concept and in imitating this idea in her novel, Arundhati Roy remained at heart no less tradition than western. To her, alienation is more related to the emotional and mental moods and attitudes of her characters than to their spiritual moral or ethical temperaments. Arundhati's protagonists never dodge the harsh reality of existence. They encounter it single handedly. They delight in despair. Ammu finds time to read to her twins' *The Jungle Book*

Roy's work clearly indicates the direction Indian fiction was taking in the hands of the third generation of urban writers. It turns Indian fiction from the romantic tryst in gardens or on river-banks to a more meaningful exploration of the world of reality. What matters to her is the character and not the tale, the situation and not the environment, the depth and not the dimension. Esoteric and secret passions and tensions fulfill her interest.

The novel describes how senior sisters monopolized in asking questions to the priests Indirectly RON criticises whatever unholy things take place in the name of religion In the second page of the novel itself the novelist criticizes the orthodox Bishops who "frequently visited the Ayemenem house for donations" (p. 2). Visiting houses for donations is a typical Kerala feature and it is a very common sight to see the political parties vying with one another to fill their coffers. Here the only difference is that it is religious leaders instead of political leaders.

The refusal to bury Ammu's body in the church cemetery is another instance where the contemporary religious leaders are exposed. The bone of contention was that Ammu had an affair with Velutha, who was an untouchable Christianity was intolerant to such actions which the novelist perhaps chooses to disagree with

The issues like alcoholism, violence, consumerism etc. form part of the major and minor areas of interest in the novel. But everyone might wish for a society with healthy people and a society without snobs and a society without corruption and unrealistic planning in the field of education. This does not mean that other issues should altogether be ignored

A word should be said about the use of time and space in the novel. A huge general shift in perception and in consciousness for the western world heralded the modern century. As Hughes (1958) depicts "nearly all students of the last years of the nineteenth century have sensed in some form or another profound psychological change" (p. 34). It meant rejection of positivism, and abandoning the notion of "Objectivity". But one of the most striking features of the period was a fascination with time, space and their relationship. Randall Stevenson has observed that time and space became fashionable terminology during the 1920's and a conscious theme among artists and intellectuals.

Roy dreams of a fragrant world full of beautiful flowers, where the polluted air of hatred and violence would have no role. As a fighting woman with spirited individual, she does not expect to make a cake walk in the smooth surface of life. She is ready to march and pave the way for many others by being a good source of inspiration. Her search for feministic identity is a trend setter for the new generation of feministic writers. She gives a strong call for the awakening of not only women but in general the entire human kind from its long sleep of ignorance.

India is deep rooted in spirituality. Serving God through serving fellow beings is the under current of all the Indians. Finding divinity in everyone or even in everything is typical Indian mind. 'Where love is, God is' is Indian staunch belief. Such an Indian mind in Roy has made her to name her book as *The God of Small Things*. When she talks about her choice of her title she says:

To me the god of small things is the inversion of God. God's a big thing and God's in control. The God of small things.....whether it's the way the children see things or whether it's the insect life in the book, or the fish or the stars there is a not accepting of what we think of as adult boundaries. This small activity that goes on is the under life of the book. All sorts of boundaries are transgressed upon ([http\\www.arundhati.roy.org.uk](http://www.arundhati.roy.org.uk))

The small activities that go on in real life is the under life of the book. All sorts of boundaries are transgressed upon. At the end of the first chapter she says little events and ordinary things are just smashed and reconstituted, imbued with new meaning to become the bleached bones of the story. To her it is a story that examines things very closely but also from very, very distant point, almost from geological time and there is a pattern in it and tells how in these small events and in these small lives the world intrudes and because of it people become unprotected. The world by intruding into the smallest, deepest core of their being changes their life. She had not started the book after deciding the title. She left the title to be printed at the last minute. She had named one of the chapters as *The God of Small Things* without her awareness. That chapter deals with Ammu's dream of one armed man, the God of Loss, the God of Small Things. When she read the book later she could not believe the amount of references there are to small things. She understood that the people had to put their faith in fragility and stick to the small things, and she felt that the title is very appropriate to the story.

She Says:

(*The God of Small Things*).... is not just about small things; it's about how the smallest things connect to the biggest things - that's the important thing. And that's what writing will always be about for me...Roy as quoted in Kingsnorth, [http//www.untitled](http://www.untitled))

Literature reflects the life, the society from where it is born. Though not like History, which gives the blunt truth, literature depicts the society with the needed garnishing. In *The God of Small Things* Roy implicitly presses for greater social reform in the rigid positioning of women and the intolerable plight of the deprived class. The world of novel is caught in a state of flux where-the values of the patriarchal society are under attack from a new world in which self interest

and self - aggrandizement and social equality are forcing their way.

The God of Small Things shows the reality of the routine going-on in an upper-class Syrian Christian family at Ayemenem in Kerala flourishing in natural beauty with the mysterious Meenachal cruising along its periphery. Roy deftly balances and eases the tensions accumulated from the cruel realities of life by shifting the attention to the dazzling delights of nature in an innocent musical language structure that pours from the heart and mind of a child. It is through the play with the words, coinage of new phrases that the children are able to lighten the dense dark moments in a way providing some relief and simultaneously evoking pathos.

Comrade K. N. M. Pillai firmly believed that Estha's generation of Ayemenem Family was perhaps paying for its forefather's bourgeois decadence. He saw that one was mad and the other divorced, probably barren. Obviously Estha was the mad one and Rahel the barren one who was "die-vorced". The impression that we get of Rahel is that of a young imaginative girl. She was a deprived child who failed to receive love when she was a child and even later. She was often defiant and a rebel who never tolerated the snobs. Throughout her life she had to suffer neglect, neglect by her mother and everyone else. She always had the feeling that she had been uncared for and that was why she thought of escaping into a world which she thought, would take care of her. She was mostly alone and nobody took interest in her affairs.

Chacko did his undergraduation at Delhi University during the euphoria of 1957, when the Communists won the State Assembly Elections. Chacko's hero E.M.S. Namboodiripad was invited by Nehru to form a government. Chacko studied his treatise on *The Peaceful Transition to Communism* "with an obsessive diligence and an ardent fan's unquestioning approval" (p. 67). Every morning Pappachi, his father derided his argumentative Marxist son by reading out newspaper reports of *riots*, strikes and incidents of police brutality that convulsed Kerala. 'So, Karl Marx!' Pappachi would sneer when Chacko came to the table. 'What shall we do with these bloody students now? The stupid goons are agitating against our People's Government. Shall we annihilate them? Surely students aren't people anymore?' "(p. 67). Certainly Pappachi was sarcastic and looked down upon the party as one which could be inhuman when dealing with agitators. Students or not was not the concern of the party and it wouldn't even believe that students were "people".

A Discussion with K. Balagopal, Human Right Forum She Says

You must be joking. Just because you don't have the Ranvir Sena operating in Kerala, just because you don't have caste massacres, does it make Malayali society caste free? Have we lowered our standards that much? Like most other communities in India, Kerala too functions along elaborately and explicitly drawn lines of caste and religion. It maybe that because of the legacy of the Marxists it is not as up front, as vulgarly on display as it is in other places. But it would be delusional to believe that it does not exist, or that transgressions will be easily tolerated. However, it has to be said that Kerala is not the same as Bihar or Rajasthan when it comes to caste conflict. But I'm waiting to see how the situation in Chengara pans out. If you go to Chengara you will see what you never see in Kerala. A hidden nation of Dalits and Adivasis has risen to claim land on a corporate rubber estate. Go there and you will see what upper caste and upper class Malayali society wants to wish away. (<file:///K:/Out-Caste%20%20Interview%20with%20Arundhati%20Roy.htm>)

In another interview interwar asked "whether romanticism of Velutha a misinterpretation of Dalit identity"? Then she says

That, if you don't mind my saying so, is absolute nonsense. In *The God of Small Things*, Velutha is not the only victim of caste discrimination. He lost his life. Ammu lost her mind and then her life. Estha lost his voice and Rahel lost

everyone she loved. It's a bit clichéd and untrue to look at Velutha as a voiceless victim. If there is a voiceless victim – literally, it's Esthappen. In fact, you see Velutha as the only really political character – someone who was a Naxalite, someone who was in a protest march, someone whose anger and politics sets him apart from his family and community, someone who was prepared to do something about his anger.

(<file:///K:/Out-Caste%20%20Interview%20with%20Arundhati%20Roy.htm>)

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, contemporary society stands in the novel with its pitfalls. It would be remembered for untouchability, certainly a canker in a civilized society. It is difficult to believe that even schools were started exclusively for the untouchables.

The second major problem highlighted is environmental problems. Very often people would forget about their surroundings to make life miserable for themselves and for their future generations. One gets enough evidence in the novel to prove this point.

In short, the contemporary cultural scene as portrayed in the novel is far from satisfactory. As the novelist remarks in the sixth chapter of the novel the feeling one gets is that India (and of course Kerala) is going to the dogs. Basically all these have also to do with the social and economic life of the people. In the main money plays a very important role. The influence of the electronic media also may be playing a role to make matters worse.

Several other aspects of the contemporary society gets delineated in the novel. Next, we shall have a cursory glance at some of the other issues which are focused in the novel. To begin with marginalisation of women will be considered.

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